I Blog Therefore I Am

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Abstract Twenty-five years since the publication of *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, this essay reflects on the extraordinary changes in the nature of celebrity, including its radical democratization by way of the internet. Such changes reflect old dilemmas and pose new challenges as the internet and publishing worlds begin to merge and print culture is left behind.

Keywords Celebrity · Internet · Movie criticism

It is now 25 years—ye gods, a full quarter century—since I published *Intimate Strangers*, subtitled *The Culture of Celebrity*. It was, if nothing else, a pioneering work; not many people at that time had written, at book length, about the power of fame to shape—and distort—our perceptions of reality. In some ways, the book is now out of date—its references to politicians, artists, public figures of all sorts, are somewhat quaint, its quotations from journalists, scholars and other commentators in need of updating. That said, I remain, perhaps perversely, proud of the work, I think some of its generalizations remain apt and useful. Like a lot of antiques, it continues, I think, to deserve a place in the house—maybe not in the living room, but possibly in the guest bedroom. Or the rumpus room.

Riffling through *Intimate Strangers* now, I can't help but think how radically the celebrity culture has mutated in such a short span. More important, I detect in it a painful lack of prescience. I'm referring to its complete lack of attention to the onrushing internet. I suppose that's excusable. I, for example, did not acquire my first computer until a year after the book was published. Even then, I used it primarily for work—to send my pieces to *Time* magazine, where I was then employed as a movie reviewer. I also used it to compose books and articles for other publications. The

idea of using the machine to “browse” the internet did not occur to me until later—mostly because there was no internet to speak of in the mid-eighties. To this day, to be honest, I remain largely innocent of Facebook, Twitter and all the rest of social networking sites. I need IMDb for my work, and every once in awhile Google, even Wikipedia, have saved my bacon as I rush to finish something on deadline. But my need for “chat” appears to be minimal and though I do blog from time to time, I've never done so for a site of my own. I work, or have worked for, sites that apply traditional journalistic standards to their internet activities.

Even so, my primary allegiance is to print. I don't think any idea I have is entirely real until I see it on paper. I relish the relative slowness of the process—the leisurely revisions, the generally helpful queries from editors, the eventual complaints from readers. Above all, it permits me to keep re-thinking and revising right up to the last moment. Some of the implicit authority of print, with which the evanescence of the internet cannot compete, derives from this method of doing business. I adore slooow.

But that's pretty much beside the point. It is a nicety writers appreciate, but readers are largely unaware of—especially nowadays. For the brutal truth is that the internet has completely changed our ideas of how writerly fame—all kinds of fame, really—is attained and sustained. Putting the point simply, the internet has—or is in the final process of—democratizing celebrity—at least in the minds of people for whom achieving fame (or its simulacrum) is a primary goal, instead of the lucky by-product of serious work.

I see this particularly in my former field, movie criticism. I, like dozens of other reviewers, at publications large and small, was unceremoniously dumped by *Time*. This was about a year and a half ago—with no sensible reason given. As it happened, that was OK with me—43 years of reviewing is more than enough, and my interest in the field was waning, especially as the production of worthwhile movies—films you could sink your critical teeth into—had long been declining, both in the United States and elsewhere.

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There are many reasons for the partial demise of movie reviewing (and other kinds of cultural commentary as well): There's the increasingly brutal dominance of the world's screens by the mindless, action-packed American blockbuster, the lack of world-class auteurs (Bergman, Kurosawa, et al) interest in whom fueled the rise of somewhat more serious reviewing in the 1960s and 70s, the increasingly dismal financial condition of newspapers and magazines, which have for many years been shedding staff in every department, but especially among reviewers because of the perceived lack, in this environment, of readers for relatively sophisticated criticism. I suspect, as well, that the management of most publications, ever dominated by cultural imbeciles, was glad of an excuse to get rid of us, irrelevant as we were to their hairy-chested love of "hard" news, and their fundamental misapprehension about the larger, if more amorphous, social functions of their publications. In their calculations, I am convinced they also thought that there was plenty of reviewing going on elsewhere—i.e., on the internet—so that the slack would be taken up.

In this they were in some sense correct. There were a number of highly competent critics working at the better and more prominent web sites (for example, *Slate*). But that's not what we're talking about right now. What we're discussing are the dozens—doubtless hundreds—of blogs devoted to reviewing film. Some of them are maintained by former reviewers, plowing their old fields while they fecklessly look for better paying—or should I merely say "paying"?—work than this kind of family farming provides. Most of them, though, are posted by people without a shred of qualification for their self-appointed task. Oh, sure, maybe they once did a bit of reviewing for their college papers. Or have been praised for their bleating in the lobby by their friends—"You know, you really ought to be a critic."

Some of them, to be sure, have seen a lot of movies, though knowing some B picture director's complete filmography is not the best qualification for the job. It tends to make you into an *idiot savant*. Or nerd. You need to bring to reviewing a much broader range of knowledge—literary, historical, sociological—than most of these folks enjoy. You also need to understand that offering an opinion—thumbs up, thumbs down—is the least important aspect of reviewing. Done properly, opinion should most of the time be woven into the manner, the style, of the piece and emerge almost inferentially from it.

But where's the fun in that? What the average movie blogger wants to do is sound off and show off, to impress his readers with some form of outrageousness. For example, I recently made some of these points in a panel discussion about criticism, which was recorded on someone's iphone and sent networked. One reward of that activity

was a widely circulated cartoon of me with a pile of dog-doo on my head. Were it not for the honor of the thing...Oh, well.

My point is that internet movie "reviewing" or political commentary, or any other form of electronic critical discourse, is generally speaking an illusion. It's true existential function can be summed up aphoristically: *I blog therefore I am*.

Anyone can set up a blog. And in the crazed democracy of the internet, it can be made to look just like a site that responsible people are spending real money and real thought to launch—all you need to do is ask a friend, recently graduated from art school, to do a nifty design job for you. And you can get instant feedback from readers—never mind that they are but a few relatives, former college roommates and girl friends and the odd doofus cruising the net at three in the morning. This feels like the real deal to you. You can imagine a steady growth in readership. You may occasionally see something you wrote picked up by another blogger and your audience expanded. (25 people here, 25 people there—it mounts up.)

I have no idea how deluded the average blogger is. For some of them, I would guess that this activity is a pleasant, harmless relief from an unsatisfying day job. At the other end of the spectrum, I imagine some of them laboring under the idea that they may be exerting some genuine influence on their field. At the movie screenings I still attend—old habits die hard—I notice press agents treating them with a certain deference. I also hear them complaining when they have been left off the invitation lists for certain screenings. It doesn't take much to inflate some egos.

What is true of movie reviewers is, of course, true in every realm of internet commentary. This field is too vast—too democratic, if you will—for anyone to raise anything like an authoritative voice within it. Where everyone is a (self-appointed) authority there is, in fact, no authority. Imperfect as the traditional media are, they at least offered the modest reassurance that an institutional filter of some sort was being applied to its contributors. Assignments were being thought through, editing was in play, correction boxes were available. I never imagined that one day I would find myself defending institutional caution as it applies to critical writing, but the fact remains that, so long as it remains this side of onerous, it is a requirement of civilized discourse.

What I'm saying about the internet applies as well to the other media. In the age of Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh we are endlessly subjected to the passionate intensity of noisy idiots. I don't doubt—God help us—that they believe what they say. But I also have no doubt that their primary goal is self-aggrandizement. Their spirit is that of the more or less pathetic blogger—but with more fame and better pay—writ large.

For talk radio and cable television, are forms of blogging by another name—all opinion, no facts. The “stars” of these fields (who also write best-selling books and are capable of paying Elton John a reputed million dollars to sing at their weddings) already exercise a mobilizing power over our lunatic fringe. One of them, indeed, has boasted that he is the *de facto* head of the Tea Party movement, a claim that can’t be tested, but shouldn’t be completely ignored, either. Melding the power of traditional media with that of the new media, they are already a huge demagogic force.

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In essence, the internet (and internet-like activities) is the instrument—in and of itself and as an influence elsewhere—that enables the detachment of celebrity from any necessary connection with critical intelligence or achievement. The democratic promise of the internet has by and large deteriorated to mere populism—thousands of people (millions for all I know) talking, bloviating—for the moment, at least, largely to the already converted. There are, however, a couple of unintended consequences to this situation.

Historically every new medium—mass magazines and newspapers, film, radio, television—has begun its life with large, idealistic (and authentic) promises of extending the reach and seriousness of democratic dialogue, not to mention the possibilities of worthwhile entertainment. Like the internet, each succumbed to mediocrity quite quickly, largely, I think, as a result of corporate control, which, in particular, encourages the symbolization (and the eroticizing) of ideas and behavior—though what, exactly, Lady Gaga represents is beyond my powers of analysis (the anarchic incoherence of our world, I suppose).

At the moment, we know, instinctively, that the old mass media models of control do not apply to the internet—it is too vast for them. In general, it has not yet proved possible to “monetize” the net except in a very few instances and, it has yet to reveal many people who demonstrate a talent comparable to that of the media giants of the past—movie moguls, radio, TV and magazine visionaries—to take control of a sprawling, ill-defined enterprise, make some sense of it. It has spawned its millionaires and billionaires, but they seem interested only in making more millions and billions, which come to think of it, may be a good thing—since the possibility of making big, possibly quasi-fascist mischief, in this field cannot be ignored.

For the internet, defined broadly, plays to the most dangerous aspect of democracy, which is its populist

tendencies. It retails hidden (and not so hidden) racism, longings for Men on Horseback, blind hatred of social democratic programs, ranging from the estate tax to social security. Something like 40% of this mini-mass continues to believe that our President is ineligible for his office because he was born outside the United States.

And there is a large unintended consequence to the rise of the internet mentality. That is its effect on our privacy, specifically the privacy of the decision-making class. Traditionally, it was allowed its down time, a time when its members could gripe and grouse (and even get discretely laid) with no questions asked and no harm done. But in the age of the sleepless internet spirit, with its emphasis on gossip and gotcha journalism, that is no longer possible. Just ask Gen. Stanley McCrystal. For all I know he is an idiot. Certainly he was incredibly naïve, in the peculiarly unworldly way of lifelong soldiers, when he kicked back with his loyal staff and started dishing their top level colleagues. But nothing was said, as far as we can tell, that endangered the Republic. He just plain forgot—or never knew, given his isolation deep in our deepest boondocks—that a malevolence that thinks of itself as journalistic idealism is everywhere. Enjoy your retirement, Stan.

It turns out—or so it sometimes seems to me—that our best defense against the “dittoheads” is the inertia of the much larger American mass whose interest is intermittently focused by a misbehaving celebrity (Tom Cruise on Oprah’s couch) or, ideally, by premature death (Princess Di, Michael Jackson), when the media encourage orgies of mass sentiment, the better to sell their commemorative record albums and “collectors edition” magazines.

You can argue that this is a harmless form of commercial exploitation. But you can also argue, I think, that the encouragement of mass imbecility travesties whatever loose standards that formerly pertained in mass communication. In the celebrity obsequies conducted by the mass media, there is no attempt to still the aching, moronic hearts of the readers, no attempt to apply the balm of critical comment. The editors wish only to encourage non-stop hysteria which is the default mode for presidential elections, national catastrophes, celebrity weddings and the crowning of this year’s *American Idol*.

I do not wish to imply that our celebrity mania is creating some sort of pre-fascist condition in the United States. I do, however, wish to state that almost every aspect of our public life—whether it is hope that one can blog one’s way to fame and fortune, or the belief that a fringe movement like the Tea Party offers mass movement possibilities (not to mention photo ops for the membership if they dress funny enough)—is now conditioned by the desire of millions of Americans to break the barrier that has traditionally separated the leaders from the led, the famous from the anonymous. The latter have surely always resented

their lack of status and influence. Our history has always been subject to ugly populist outbursts—it is the main subject of Eric Hoftstader’s distinguished *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Until now, the American fringe has lacked what the internet grants them—an instrument capable of leveling the playing field, of striking back at the pointy heads who have for decades, centuries, patronized them, distrusted them, disrespected them. The possibility of violent encounters cannot be entirely dismissed, but more important, the internet, and the mentality to which it gives braying voice, gives the disenfranchised hope for a permanent disruptive voice in the national dialogue.

Even if that does not come to pass, the “frenzy for renown” (to borrow the title of Leo Braudy’s fine book) lowers the level of discussion on every imaginable topic, dimming the possibility of sophisticated political and cultural discourse at the very moment we require more

not less of it. We face the prospect of a new kind of history, one that is, in effect, all footnotes, and unattached to any sort of coherent and enlightening narrative. Let me put my point as mildly as possible: This cannot be good for us—as individuals, as a nation.

Richard Schickel is the author, co-author or editor of 36 books and the writer-director-producer of a similar number of television documentaries. Most of his work concerns filmmakers and film history. Among his best known books are *Elia Kazan: A Biography*, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life*, *Clint Eastwood: A Biography*, *The Disney Version*, *Brando: A Life in Our Times*, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*, *His Picture in the Papers*, and his memoir, *Good Morning Mr. Zip Zip Zip*. A film critic for *Life* magazine and *Time* magazine for 43 years, he was awarded an honorary degree by the American Film Institute as well as the British Film Institute Book Prize.